



Raymond A. Mason School of Business

WILLIAM & MARY

DIVERSITY GOES TO WORK PODCAST

EPISODE 3: JENNIFER BROWN – D&I CONSULTING

Jennifer Brown

I think right now we're throwing a lot of things that people in a really disjointed way and that we're sort of missing. What are we really all going after? And it honestly is the human potential to thrive.

Phil Wagner

Hello, from the halls of the Mason School of Business here at William & Mary. I'm Phil, and this is Diversity Goes To Work. Buckle up because we're getting ready to take a deep dive into the real, human lived experiences that shape and guide our diversity work in the world of work. Should be fun. Welcome listeners to episode number three. You heard that, right? Episode three of Diversity Goes To Work. I'm so excited to welcome today's guest, somebody I look up to, somebody whose work I have read actively, somebody who is now a friend of the business school in so many ways here at William & Mary. And our guest today is Jennifer Brown. Jennifer Brown envisions inclusive organizations where all of us can thrive. And I love how in her work, she helps us figure out how to make that vision a reality. Jennifer is an award-winning entrepreneur, a dynamic speaker, and a diversity and inclusion expert. She's the founder and CEO of Jennifer Brown Consulting or JBC, and her consulting firm guides some of the world's largest companies in their diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. She's an acclaimed keynote and a podcaster. And after you listen to this episode, go download her podcast, *The Will to Change*. It is so, so good. Her award-winning book, *How to Be an Inclusive Leader*, calls on allies and advocates everywhere to activate their voice. She used the training from that book to recently lead a training for our 118 new first-year MBA students here in the Mason Business School. She's also got a new book coming out this November, *Beyond Diversity*. Be sure to preorder a copy. Jennifer, thanks so much for joining us today. I again am a big fan of your work. I've read your book. I followed your work throughout all the many things that you've done. So it really is a true honor to get to chat with you here on our podcast today. As you know, our focus is to really center the work of D&I Consulting, and I think that's a little bit of a confusing enterprise. We know what consulting is, but it's a little bit different when you do it in the D&I sphere. So I'm wondering, to kick us off, can you share a bit more about how you found yourself in diversity and inclusion consulting in a full-time capacity? And perhaps how JBC came to be what it is today.

Jennifer Brown

Thank you, Phil. Yeah, it's a winding road, and no two roads are the same into the world of D&I. So we all, when we get together, we compare career trajectories and say, huh, I wonder how that happened. But the important thing is that it happened because a lot of us, we feel that this is our true passion, right? Our true calling. So there's enormous job satisfaction, I think in the field as hard as the work is. And we'll get to that later. But my road was activists in my 20s, always nonprofit, thinking I was going to be in nonprofits. But I was also a singer. And so I came to New York to be a opera singer. Study vocal performance with the plan of having a career in that space and then unfortunately injured my voice had to get a couple of surgeries, sadly to repair. But it would really fundamentally alter my ability to do eight shows a week for weeks and months at a time. So that's the problem. And I needed to reinvent and reinvented. Luckily, somebody said, you love the stage. Why don't you consider being a trainer? And they meant a leadership trainer? And I said, What's that? And then I went got a second Masters in leadership, and organizational development, which became my new and sort of, I might even argue, a deeper passion for me. And I just fell in love with facilitation and group dynamics, thinking about leadership and systems change and things like that. And I was an HR person for a while in the training and development world and then went out of my own 16 years ago. So I've had my own business, and originally it was me doing team effectiveness leadership training. Not really D&I, but I also am a member of the LGBTQ+ community, and since I was 22, but I was closeted as a performer, closeted as a corporate person, struggled as an entrepreneur to think, oh, my goodness, I need to make money. And how is that going to impact who I am? How is that going to impact my ability to do that? But I worked through it. And these days, I'm very out if you Google me. I still come out in my keynotes, but I think the dovetailing then of all. I was very much in the LGBTQ workplace advocacy conversation about 20 years ago when we were still looking at domestic partner benefits just to put a date on that, right. It feels like ancient history, but that wasn't widespread at the time. So that's what we were fighting for. And as such, got to know all these amazing companies and the people in the companies in the ERGs, the affinity groups who were leading the charge and pushing their employer to be better and to do better by the community, to recruit more, more respectfully, to market more respectfully to the LGBTQ+ consumer. So those were the early and very heady days. I loved those days. They were difficult, but it was also the sort of small group of very dedicated people trying to puzzle through. How can we get corporate America to really be in solidarity with us? And what are all the pieces that they need to do, and what would be, hold them accountable for as a community? And it was very it's still a wonderful model for change. And now we see that companies are getting pressure from all sides to do a whole bunch of things. But I think even 20 years ago; we were doing this on a much smaller level. Yeah, and so D&I consulting then. I had the company, but we were leadership-focused. And then being LGBTQ, I started to realize, wait a second, there's this thing called diversity and inclusion. It's a field. There are people who run this in companies. I started to bring in experts into my company and market them out because I love marketing in addition to the consulting that I do. And I was like, I can bring the talent, but I can maintain that Rolodex and keep sort of stay in that thought leader position and make sure that I'm providing the most amazing resources for our clients. And that's how we started to build Jennifer Brown Consulting, and I got to from very early days. I wanted to work on the

business, not in the business. I was very clear that A I was out of bandwidth really quickly in the early days. I mean, there was just no more time in the day because we were so busy, and I realized I had to scale. I just had no choice. But I think also, though, I wanted to scale because I think the team approach and all of our diversity of lived experiences is what makes JBC the amazing company that it is. And it's not just my story that matters. It's all of our stories that matter, and we get to bring those every single day. So we never anticipated this past year because 14 out of the 15 years we've been in business, it's been a very hard road to be in the D&I space really hard. And it had to be sort of deeply deep passion to weather all the apathy out there about the work and the lack of budget and resources that were allocated to this work happening. So it's been a real challenge as a business owner, and I feel like I can finally breathe this past year, Ironically, Ironically, because it's been such a painful year for so many very real reasons.

Phil Wagner

Yeah, you know I love that sort of storytelling element. And you mentioned apathy, and it seems that I think apathy is always hostile to a degree. But the apathy is really channeled into open hostility for D&I work as of late. And so, when I always think of D&I Consulting, I used to frame it as D&I consulting is really helping your client tell the D&I story. And that goes back to your point of moving them along, like getting them to push past that apathy. But you also talked about pushing the envelope, and I feel that in the openly, somewhat hostile communities, we sometimes find ourselves doing this work that pushing can be sort of uncomfortable. What is D&I Consulting? Is it telling the story and shaping the story? Is it pushing the envelope? Is it figuring out what the client needs and then adjusting your approach? What is this work that you do as an enterprise?

Jennifer Brown

So many things, it's all of those things which makes it such a unique field. It pulls on so many. We have to wear so many hats to do this well. And if you're a consultant and you're external to organizations like me, we sort of wear a couple of kinds of hats, but we have a limited authority in a way because we're not driving initiatives internally. We don't have ownership for them. But we get to be that sort of third party advisor and expert and sort of extra set of hands, sometimes depending on what a client really needs, working with that internal consultant, if you will, who's trying to generate the buy-in internally, sending out the communication, structuring the effort, winning people over to the effort, cracking through that apathy that you just said, which is still very much with us. And I agree apathy is a form of resistance, for sure. But we have to awaken people out of apathy and somehow articulate the reason for DEI and the value proposition for it in organizations in a very creative way that reaches as many different kinds of learners as we can, which means we have to be very creative about how we talk about it, thinking about what's in it for me, what's in it for other people, from where they sit in the organization, whether it's sales or marketing or the engineering side or the customer service folks or the talent acquisition people. This touches and should be weaved into each one of those functions rather than maybe being owned by this siloed function, which is traditionally what it's been. So the best D&I consultants, both internally and externally, do all

the things you just said. I meet the learner where they're at. I give people the right argument at the right time that resonates. I make it very sort of business-critical, and I also appeal to people's want to be better leaders, to be better humans also, and to be able to resonate with a changing world. And I think if you're not concerned about being able to do that, then I'm not sure you have a business in the organizational structures.

Phil Wagner

So I want to go back to that. I'm going a little off-script here, Jennifer, but you mentioned the business outcome, and I think that a lot of D&I consulting really speaks to the heart of that, right? That there are clear, measurable outcomes for your organization if they buy into this work and do it well. However, one of the things I've noted in your work is that you speak from a very theoretical place that's not always like business language. I mean, there's a lot of deeper theory. There's some critical theory. There's some feminist theory that really under work. How did you take that and learn to translate that to an audience that probably hasn't always bought into the underpinnings of that theory? How did you learn to bring real theory into this business space where it's so focused on practical and outcomes and deliverables and data? What was that process like for you?

Jennifer Brown

We really have to be able to do that because if you have a purely academic conversation, it's not going to work. I think, though, being a consultant and having a degree in organizational change, I think really grounded me in the reality of the day-to-day corporate, mainly, which is what we work in that day to day reality. And I was in corporate. I was in HR roles in various fields, from insurance to retail, just like two completely different worlds. So I did witness and gather all that language, sort of notice how things were done, notice how people spoke to each other, how they communicated, how initiatives were rolled out, what was successful. What wasn't successful. How do we get people on board? How do we think about different audiences with different levels of appetite for the change that we're suggesting? How do we speak that language? So there's so much customization in the work. And I like that you know some people don't love that because I think the last thing you want to do with your D&I work is throw, like, a boxed solution at something.

Phil Wagner

Yeah.

Jennifer Brown

It is really, really a very creative field, and you need to be armed with a variety of things. But it's interesting you notice the theory in my work because I'm not an academic at all. But I guess to me, a lot of it is just obvious. It's like if I can take one theoretical construct, like Fragility, say, from Robin DeAngelo, or take intersectionality from Dr. Kimberle Crenshaw. I think my gift is translating it to leader behavior.

Phil Wagner

Yeah.

Jennifer Brown

Thinking about like so okay, so I'm explaining intersectionality to you. But how do you put this into practice tomorrow? And I have all these ideas for how to do that because my job as a consultant has been to connect the dots. I mean, consultants have to do this all day long. It's literally you have to make it real for leaders to be able to apply it right away and to break it down into chunks that are manageable. And then you've got to take this very, quote, unquote, kind of overwhelming and potentially scary topic that puts a lot of people on the back foot and somehow make it accessible and exciting and like a growth opportunity. So that's I think where my consulting background and when I say consulting, it's interesting because I know you work with there's a lot of MBAs that are going to be listening to this. I don't mean I was ever in a big consulting firm. I wasn't in any of those. I was not a Booz Allen

Phil Wagner

Right.

Jennifer Brown

consultant on the road every week. I never was that. Although that's a fabulous grounding from a skill set perspective in the work I do. But I was more the trainer facilitator, spending literally hundreds of days in the learning classroom. So really more coming from the learning and development side, thinking about how do people think about this? How do they feel about it, and then how can I not just have this concrete bottom-line ROI conversation, which honestly doesn't really hold me? It doesn't hold my imagination.

Phil Wagner

Right.

Jennifer Brown

It's not the technicolor world that I live in. I think this is so personal. I think leadership journeys are personal. And I think if we can reach the personal learner at a place where we can kind of think about, well, what is my philosophy of change? What is my role? What is my best role in a change equation? Am I the instigator? Am I the supporter? Am I the fire starter? Am I like thinking about, like, avatars of roles we play? I mean, I think about that a lot. And even in the D&I world, there's the activists, there's the fire starters, who are the sort of very uncompromising, I might say, like anti-racist specialists.

Phil Wagner

Yeah.

Jennifer Brown

I'm not that. I'm the translator, probably. I'm thinking about these concepts and relating it to behaviors. And then I might even advise the organization. So how do we hold people accountable then for this behavior change? What do we need to set up? Right. But those translators are critical. I might argue the world needs a lot more of us that can make that message make sense and put it into real terms and be able to make it real and scale it—scaling it right. It's not enough to just have a bunch of people in a room like we now think about as a team. So how will we hold people accountable over time and not just hold them accountable, but equip them with the knowledge to meet the accountability to meet the metrics and the responsibility right? We treat people so badly in organizations. We hold people accountable for things that we haven't even really equipped them to achieve. And inclusion and diversity is a really new language for a lot of people, and we just have to back up like, we're going way too fast for, like, 99% of people. So that's really important to think about. When you're a good consultant, you meet the learner where they're at. And that should be your obsession. The second you get out of bed every morning, you should say, how can I meet people where they're at, give them the right thing, the right next step. How can I encourage that along? And how can I accelerate somebody's learning journey? Because at the end of the day, that's what matters.

Phil Wagner

And I love that so much because I teach communications at the management level. How do you do this work? I think it goes back to communications and not just in your deliverables, not just having excellent conversations, not just having great presentations that make people's mouth drop open, but stepping back and being fundamentally self-aware and listening and tailoring your approach from there, I think it's critical. I want to build on that a little bit more, so in *How to be an Inclusive Leader*, you center a very clear message, and that's that in your belief, anybody can and should be an inclusive leader. But I want to flip that a little bit. Can anyone be a D&I consultant? You talk a little bit about your story, and you talk about being LGBTQ and being female-identified. I mean, what about straight-up like white men? Do you have to have those D&I anchor points to do this work well, or what makes a good D&I consultant?

Jennifer Brown

That is the hot question right now. Yeah. Who gets to do the work right? Who has the I say, like moral authority to do it. And, you know, I guess there's like, my answer before this past year, and then there's like, a little twist on it related to this year. But historically, there wasn't as much scrutiny, I think, on who's in this space because there was so few of us anyway. So it never occurred to a lot of us. I think that, oh, my goodness, like white practitioners, are flooding the zone. And are we okay with that? What does that mean for the field, et cetera? I mean, nobody was flooding the zone as long as I was in it. Those of us who were in it, we're so grateful to kind of know about each other, find each other, and we all had our own niches. And I've been in it now for 16 years. But many I know have been in it longer. I would say it was very diverse for years. And then I think the question now is one of equity, which is which

voices have been underrepresented and who can really teach something effectively when you don't have a lived experience related to what needs to be taught. But then I might argue that then who teaches what I might call allyship? Who teaches the intersectional, the perspective, and also the perspective of those of us, which is, by the way, all of us who have privileges with a small piece. So when I say privilege, I don't mean just white and male, which is typically how it's referenced and weaponized, frankly. And those are two kinds. But there's a list of 50 others and many of which I have access to as an LGBTQ+ woman in a male-dominated world and somebody who arguably has strong with marginalized identities. So I think the problem with saying that certain folks make good consultants and certain don't is that it really change is going to take all of us and all of our perspectives. Some messengers, some messengers that look like me, might be able to crack in and get into a room or an environment where I can be perhaps heard differently, and I don't say that because I condone it. I disagree heartily with it, but it is a reality. I mean, I've seen it happen a million times with the straight white men that I know that do this work, walking into a room of straight white men. That conversation is really different than the conversation that would happen if I'm in there or if my black woman friend and colleague on the JBC team is in there, right. And we all in my world. We know that this is true. We make no bones about the fact that this is just where we're at as a human race.

Phil Wagner

Yeah.

Jennifer Brown

I think given that foundation of let's assume this is true where we're at, my goal on my team is to have a wide diversity of voices and messengers and teachers on our team, and that we're sort of able to pair people up is really interesting. If you can pair up different lived experiences as a facilitator team, it's amazing, but you've got to be again kind of paying attention to where is this audience at in terms of their who do they need to see? How do things need to be presented? What's going to have the most traction most quickly? Thinking about how can I put the right messenger in front of a group of people to save ourselves time and to accelerate the growth, which is to me, I keep my eye on the prize.

Phil Wagner

Yeah.

Jennifer Brown

That's where I want to go and not by any means necessary. But I think we can get creative. But I will say it's a hot topic and question to say who's allowed to do this work. It's interesting because you could look at me and say, not knowing I'm LGBTQ+. And honestly, some people on social media have come after me and criticized me,

Phil Wagner

Yeah.

Jennifer Brown

not knowing who I am, and even if they knew who I am, maybe they believe that I don't have a role to play. And it's hard because I think, gosh, is it my job to then decenter myself and leave the field? And that has occurred to a lot of people both already in the field and also lots of aspiring people who want to get in the field. But I would tell you all the D&I consulting skill set is not just from our lived experience. I mean, that should be obvious, but we may have direct lived experience of certain identities and be able to teach from that place, and we have a ton of passion. It's also a technical skillset that has to do with things I think it has to do with our change management, adult learning, conflict management, facilitation and group dynamics, organizational design, learning, learning design, learning development because we're always thinking about learning approaches in this work. Less so, I think legal less so because that's something that I think can be that's a technical skill that can be accessed or may be outsourced. But if I was talking about successful consultant skill sets. It's funny; they're not really D&I skills. They're actually from these other domains that make us very effective. So those are the things I would seek out. And then if you compare your lived experience and even yes, sometimes, by the way, white guys have a whole lot of diversity dimensions going on. It's just not visible.

Phil Wagner

Right.

Jennifer Brown

I would never I tell people you have no idea who's sitting across from you because there is so much work to be done. There is enough work and then some for all of us to have roles to be doing this. There's more companies coming online all the time who are just now creating their first positions, and each one of us does it in a certain way that I think we'll reach some part of our audience. If we could somehow unleash that power of all of us, I think we'd move faster.

Phil Wagner

What I love about you, Jennifer; it's in all over your work. It's on your podcast. It's in your book. It's in this conversation. You're always willing to talk about this work can sometimes be messy. Just the field is sort of messy. And I think a lot of people probably get access to D&I consultancy because they find themselves with a mess on their hands, right.

Jennifer Brown

Yes.

Phil Wagner

It seems to me that D&I work plays out on two distinct levels, right, and probably shapes your work as a consultant. So you have organizations that are super proactive have recognized there's apathy, or they haven't done what they've needed to do to have effective D&I work done in their organization. So they bring you on to say, what can we do? But I would imagine that you also get a lot of reactive companies that, for some reason or another, they've got a PR

crisis or inner turmoil like something has hit the fan. And so, you probably are brought in to help solve problems. I'm curious how you approach each of those is one of those more enjoyable to you as a consultant. Are your strategies different? Like, how do you approach that?

Jennifer Brown

Oh, yeah. You'd be surprised. You'd think a lot would approach us because of crisis. But actually, I think a lot more approach us because they know this is a business differentiator. They know that they need the help of an external expert, that they don't know what they don't know or they know what they don't know, and they want that accountability partner or that sort of SME on the outside that can tell them so this is what this company is doing. And this is what your competitors are doing, or here's the industry. And here's where you sit in this sort of continuum in your industry. Don't you want to be out in front? So honestly, the competitive advantage piece probably is the biggest driver. But yes, sometimes companies are in crisis, and I think it depends. I think of readiness and willingness, that classic model of are we ready to do the work? And are we willing to do the work two different things? So we try to get our hands around that and kind of say, how bought in is the CEO and why? What has happened here before, if anything? And how did it go? Who was involved? How is DEI viewed in this culture? What do we need to undo in terms of previous damage or failed attempts, right? What would make a successful alignment for a successful initiative look like? Who needs to be in the room? Where do we start? All that stuff, and I think in going through that, that's our kind of intake process you figure out like, okay, so what's the urgency? Is this a crisis because something didn't happen, and somebody was embarrassed publicly? Or is it the CEO's ego, or is it maybe usually CEOs involved because honestly, CEOs often kind of hold the keys to the stuff. They're either super on fire. And I came from another company that did this better. And they're coming into a company that has nothing.

Phil Wagner

Yeah.

Jennifer Brown

That often happens. And the CEO is like; we need to build this, like yesterday. And can you help me accelerate that and sort of generate the right structure for it? Because the CEO doesn't know what the structure needs to be. All they know is that they need it as a competitive differentiator. And they need a story to be able to tell on the news or in the headlines or to their partners. I mean, deals are won and lost these days partially and more and more on if I'm sitting across the table from you and we're doing a big deal like I want to know what your D&I plan is like, what are your statistics? What is your representation was like? To me, this is like organizational risk factors.

Phil Wagner

Yeah.

Jennifer Brown

That if we're sitting across the table, we need to be like, wow. So you're not doing anything about this? That's really an interesting choice. I wonder what that means. If we spend money with you, how much are you going to understand our customers? Like, how much are we going to have a shared value set and commitment to having the best and brightest and most diverse workforce because we agree that that's what's best for our sort of health as an organization. So I do think the pressure is coming from a lot of different directions. And I'll take it all. I think a company crisis can make an excellent client because the appetites there the accountability, maybe from the board, or maybe they're being audited. And maybe, yes, people are being marched through this compliance exercise. But maybe the challenge there is how can I turn compliance into willingness

Phil Wagner

Yeah.

Jennifer Brown

and into skills? And some of us as consultants like that challenge, you ask, what's your favorite? My favorite is I love working with learners who are so hungry for every single thing that we can give. I love an audience who's already kind of diving deeply into everything they can get on this topic. And they want to ask me the really hard questions, not from a place of resistance or doubt,

Phil Wagner

Yeah.

Jennifer Brown

but from a place, I want to know how to manage this when I hear it. That's the kind of conversation I really love because then we're interacting at this higher, more strategic level that actually challenges me as a consultant to think through something that I haven't really thought through before. It stretches me. And I love being stretched. I mean, after a while, you do feel there's a repetition in the work like, oh, my goodness, if I have to explain this one more time. So there's a little bit.

Phil Wagner

As a Professor, I certainly get that sentiment. And I think one of the things we teach our students now is that you can't not be in the business of D&I work. There's this long-standing misconception, and it sort of just gets pushed to HR, and HR and PR will deal with it. HR and PR will deal with all the crises that pop up, and otherwise, we're good. But as you know, it's about organizational risk. It's about emerging as a true leader in this space. And you mentioned the will to change. I love your podcast. So as we sort of moved towards the end of this conversation, we situated those two different types of D&I response. You've got proactive people. You've got reactive people. I would suspect that you've got sort of like a third space here, too, right? You've had to have come across leaders who do this work, but grudgingly, they

do it. But straight up, only because they have to. How do you see that work? I know on your podcast, and you talk about this will to change. It's an intrapersonal decision that you've got to decide to shift your own thinking. But how do you approach clients that might sign on begrudgingly or people in the enterprise that you consult? We might do this work only begrudgingly.

Jennifer Brown

Right because our clients aren't doing the begrudging, right? Our clients are on board, and usually, senior executives are pretty on board, because funny enough, it's really the frozen middle in organizations you might teach this. But it's where the change efforts go to die is the frozen middle. Is that middle manager level that's really tricky to kind of get the message through to and properly I think incentivize and encourage and train so that they can meet D&I goals because that middle manager role has a lot of day-to-day tactical pressures on it. And D&I can take some time. It takes attention. It takes maybe slowing down in a world that's just about speed and accomplishing things. I think that the nature of work and that level of the organization makes D&I like hard to apply and hard to track honestly and hard to measure, and hard to incentivize and reward around. But that app that sort of I'm doing this because I'm being forced to go to unconscious bias training and oh wait a second. Aren't we fixed because we all went through this training? I sometimes wonder if people just don't understand what all this is about. I think somehow, the D&I field has not done a great branding job with what we're really going after. And I think, honestly, maybe I'm just unusual, too, in terms of how I define what we're going after. We're literally talking about the future of viable business

Phil Wagner

Yeah.

Jennifer Brown

and the future of talent pipelines that are super diverse that are coming into organizations saying, I expect inclusion on day one. I'm going to bring my full self. I'm not going to be in the closet. I'm going to let my flag fly and talk about all my mental health needs. I mean, it's very transparent and open, and we're so not prepared. So I like challenge myself honestly to talk about DEI without talking about DEI because honestly, it's a leadership conversation. It's a future work conversation. It's a human potential conversation. It is literally, to me, the gateway to having a purpose-oriented, engaged workforce that really wants to be somewhere. That really wants to give that extra something because they feel seen and heard and valued. So speaking of inventing new language to describe this in, and you didn't hear me say kind of anti-racist and all of that, that is definitely kind of a track of the education that's going on. And I believe that you have to be ready to take that work on because to me, throwing that kind of work into an organization that's done none of the stuff that I'm talking about is probably going to create more defensiveness and create a whole different problem. We have to prepare. There is a sequence of learning, I think, and a sequence of readiness, and there is an order that I would put some of these topics in. My stuff, I think, is very foundational, and at the same time, I

think very future thinking and sort of big picture, and also your role as a person that I don't want to shame you into learning. I want to invite you on a learning journey, but I think there is sort of as consultants we need to think about the order that we give things in. And that order, I think, needs to make sense in terms of people's progression. If we think of our own progression as learners, what were we ready to learn and when and why? Who pushed us? But what is too much pushing? What is eating so much that you feel sick? Like, what's the point?

Phil Wagner

Yeah.

Jennifer Brown

You want to digest, you want to metabolize, you want to give things time to really, like, be in our tissue. And if we can kind of move with learners in this way, giving them the right thing at the right moment and pushing just enough because we got to be uncomfortable to be learning and to be leading. I think right now, we're throwing a lot of things at people in a really disjointed way and that we're sort of missing. What are we really all going after? And it honestly is the human potential to thrive, and that fundamentally is what we're talking about. And D&I has not been described in that way. I don't think.

Phil Wagner

I so agree with you. Jennifer, I have two more questions for you as we conclude the conversation here today. But there are a sizable number of D&I consultants out there, and that number is growing regularly. They're not all great. So what might bring on when I should say my bringing on a D&I consultant be especially valuable. And particularly, what should organizations consider when they're thinking about bringing on a D&I consultant? You got any advice from your years in the practice?

Jennifer Brown

Yeah, I mean, if you have industry background that you can somehow find in someone, that might behoove you because every industry speaks its own language. So if you're a defense contractor, you may want to think about folks who spent decades in that industry, and that can speak that language. But again, that doesn't make you a good consultant. And I love that you said that. What makes a good consultant? You know, I think the messenger back to what we're talking about earlier is sort of what physical package does the ideal person need to be in in order to be like, heard by those who are resistant or apathetic in an organization? I think that's an important piece. How I would mostly, though, listen for how somebody processes information and what sorts of if you were interviewing someone, I want to understand, how do they lay out their strategy? They put the pieces in place. How do they think about organizational change? Where have they implemented things before? So much in D&I is not book-learned. It is experience learned. And it is all field, all practicum, all application. It's a strange field in that way because I wouldn't care how many certifications you have in D&I, and by the way, there's not that many. And I don't care about your degrees, because what I really want to know is, where have you built this before?

Phil Wagner

Yeah.

Jennifer Brown

Were you on a team that built this? What worked? What didn't work? What might you recommend here, given what we've told you? That piece, having seen it and be either adjacent or a part of it or leading it, is our currency, really. And our visibility across as many different industries and different sizes of companies is really critical. I have lots of friends who have gone from the big, big company to the smaller company, even though they're very senior, but the ability to pivot. And if there's nobody else to be able to own the whole thing and build the whole thing yourself. I mean, in a way, you'd think a smaller company with no D&I history might be an easier build, but in a way, it can be a very hard build because you have to know everything. You got to have the whole picture in your head how you're going to build it. Versus joining the Wells Fargo DEI team, where there's, like, 60 people,

Phil Wagner

Right.

Jennifer Brown

many of whom are PhDs, and you're just like you're bolting on and kind of hanging on to the caboose of the train, you know, because that's a best-in-class team. And yes, Wells has had their problems, but I use them as an example because they're one of the biggest D&I teams I know of. So as you evaluate talent, I'd say, how much does this person feel? How much do I feel that they are going to be very meet us where we're at not be judgmental about where we're at. I think there's a little bit of this is what you should be doing. This is where you should be. You should be tackling this. You have to do this or that or whatever.

Phil Wagner

Condescending, yeah.

Jennifer Brown

Yeah, it's a bit. And this can be a little coming from academics sometimes that, again, not translating it to where people really are. I don't think it's not something that should be imposed. This is something that we should be eliciting from people.

Phil Wagner

I love that.

Jennifer Brown

I mean, right. And that, to me, is the most challenging, amazing work is to figure out, like, I could give you a boxed solution all day long or bring in courses. But if I don't bring in the right courses, it's going to be a disaster.

Phil Wagner

Right.

Jennifer Brown

So anyway, I think being other focused and extremely emotionally intelligent about others, and then what do they need? When do they need it? Who needs it? In what order? How do I think this is going to go? But again, we're not going to know because you can't predict how this goes. You can build. I wouldn't even do a three to five-year strategic plan with D&I.

Phil Wagner

Yeah.

Jennifer Brown

Because look at last year, so much changed. So I think to being flexible, like doing enough of a minimum viable product that everybody's happy. But then having the buy-in and support to say, you know, let's go back and revisit this. Let's look at this target again. Let's think about the feedback we're hearing from people around. What more they need to learn in order to reach this target. Being very sort of responsive to that is a huge part of the skill set.

Phil Wagner

So my final question is in your book, you know, and you really center this message that anyone can and should be an inclusive leader. We talked about that earlier.

Jennifer Brown

Yeah.

Phil Wagner

Do you still believe that in 2021? And what can those of us who would identify as inclusive leaders? Where can we really focus our energy for the most good in the complicated D&I sphere that currently exists in our modern world?

Jennifer Brown

Oh, my God, two huge questions. Can everybody be an inclusive leader? I probably have to believe that that's true. Otherwise, I wouldn't be able to get out of bed in the morning. I really I am such an optimist about people, and I think some folks can be huge resistors and turn into huge champions. And I've seen it happen. And I want to extend that belief and faith in people that it may take time. And it may take something huge to happen in your personal life, sometimes for you to have that light bulb moment. But I'll tell you, ask anybody in my world, we live for those light bulb moments like we live for them. They make life worth living. It's hard work, and it's hard-won. But it's really cool when it happens. So anyway, I do believe that. And you know what? Even if values-wise, I don't agree with inclusion, say you don't agree with meeting LGBTQ, whatever that means. What is helpful, though, is when you enter an organization, you subscribe to the values of that organization, and you sign up to be a leader or

a manager. And as such, you have a duty to represent that so you can be an inclusive leader and not necessarily have an alignment with your personal values outside of work. I can just leave that there, like, okay, you know, to me, what matters is the kind of experience of belonging that you're creating, and you have a skill to do that, regardless of perhaps what you believe. It's not ideal, but it might be how we get people there. And then your other question was, what's one thing we can do to kind of accelerate others ourselves and others in our environments. I'd like us all to be louder voices. I'd like us to put our ally or co-conspirator hat on and be very vigilant for bias when it shows up and, you know, be the spokesperson so that somebody else doesn't have to always be the educator or the one that is complaining about harmful language or microaggressions. I think all of us need to have this hat on everywhere we go and speak up and invite a conversation for learning for people, particularly of different kinds of privileges, who may not know and may not understand. So I think that if we could do that more and more, it would lessen the burden, the emotional labor on others who've really, really been struggling to thrive in a workplace not built by and for them. And I say them I mean us too. I was that closeted person for years. Who was like, what am I doing here? This is horrible, and I know that I'm not shining and doing my best work because I'm spending a ton of time like living a lie about my personal life and my family. How much of us who are relatively more comfortable in any given system? How can we be the vigilant ones? How can we be the ones that speak up? How can we give the feedback? Because it's less risky for us to do that.

Phil Wagner

Right.

Jennifer Brown

Right, and so I would challenge all of you to think about when was the last time I gave somebody some feedback about language or a joke or comment? Or when was the last time I walked into an interview process and realized there were no candidates that weren't male or weren't white? Did I say something? Did I sort of put my foot down and say, I'm not participating in this? We need to do better. We can notice things everywhere because they're everywhere.

Phil Wagner

Yeah.

Jennifer Brown

Like literally, you can blindfold yourself and just go like there. There's a problem because it's everywhere. So pick a couple of spots to up the ante, put some pressure on. Know that in doing that, you are sort of scaling this effort and not leaving the work to oh, HR will do it. Diversity team will do it. The ERGs will do it. I wrote the book so that all of the rest of us would understand what we need to do so that we can all be participating in a concrete way.

Phil Wagner

I love that. Jennifer, there's so much good stuff here to unpack. Speak up. Be a vigilante. Invite others to learn. I love how you've done that for me. I love that our listeners learn from that. We will certainly link to your book. And I know that this is not the end of a conversation between you and I. It's been so stellar. Thank you for joining us. I appreciate it more than I can express. Jennifer Brown of Jennifer Brown Consulting. Thank you so much.

Jennifer Brown

Thank you so much, Phil.

Phil Wagner

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